

Words of Welcome

by **Dr. Max Oliver Schmidt**, Evangelische Akademie zu Berlin

Dear Audience, speakers, guests,

On behalf of the Evangelische Akademie zu Berlin, which has the privilege of serving as a cooperation partner of the Berlin Conference this year, I am eager to collaborate with you in formulating innovative concepts for a prospective European future, thereby addressing the significant challenges of our present and future.

It is evident that we are confronted with significant challenges. The ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, the accelerating destruction of the nature and the phenomenon of climate change, the growth in support for far-right political parties and the resurgence of misanthropic sentiment represent a significant threat to the democratic order and to the viability of a just society. Furthermore, the governments of Spain, France and Poland are experiencing significant instability. In Germany, the government has been dissolved. Hungary is under the rule of an autocrat, Italy is under the rule of a fascist, the Netherlands is under the rule of right-wing extremists, and in the United States, Trump is preparing an anti-democratic government that will restrict freedoms that have been hard-won.

The question that remains is how we might respond to these challenges.

A prevalent theme in the discourse is the pervasive sense of uncertainty and fear. It is my contention that we should not allow ourselves to become insecure and afraid, given that we can place our trust in the European project, which is of, by and for the people. One must have confidence in the European Union and its institutions, including the European Parliament, the European Court of Human Rights, and the robust civil society organizations that advocate for human rights. Nevertheless, it is imperative to adopt a critical stance with regard to European agencies such as FRONTEX, which have been found to contravene human rights.

The current challenges provide an opportunity to liberate ourselves and Europe from the constraints of national limitations and boundaries, and to eradicate racism. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to adopt a more critical perspective with regard to the political, cultural and social aspects of our society. The question thus arises as to how this objective can be attained.

It is imperative that we devise innovative solutions and foster creativity in order to shape a unified Europe. Nevertheless, it is necessary to define the concept of "creation" and to explain why this conference is of such significance.

In order to influence the direction of European integration, it is necessary to engage with the community of art. It is only through the medium of aesthetics and autonomous projections about society that social criticism can be formulated. Such contributions can facilitate social change and promote social and political justice.

The self-description of Europe as a pluralistic-democratic project of modernity was, on occasion, a mere façade, designed to disguise the existence of violent structures. In order to achieve a genuinely pluralistic and democratic system, it is necessary to resolve the current contradictions. Nevertheless, success is unattainable without the contribution of art, nor without a position within the global system. In the reflexive and (self-)critical examination of Europe as a project of modernity, art serves as a site of emancipation, where European thought and ideas can be negotiated, scrutinised, and further developed.

It would be erroneous to view European ideas in an exclusive manner. It would be erroneous to romanticise or glorify this community. It is imperative that the European Community is recognised as a community of all people. It is therefore imperative that Europe does not remain

a European project; it must become a project of humanity, in which all can participate equally and freely, and in which emancipatory power is exercised.

The plurality of Europe is therefore rooted in the diverse cultures that act as a paradoxical intervention in the European community on repeated occasions. Art has the potential to dismantle existing boundaries and provide visibility and recognition to the often marginalised voices of oppressed groups.

The concept of culture, which encompasses art and the fine arts, can be understood as a "Denkfigur," a paradoxical intervention for the European community. It challenges the status quo and attempts to disrupt self-evident and often hegemonic structures. Furthermore, it prompts reflection in various domains, including politics, economics, media, and religion.

Such interventions of art should facilitate the challenging of our colonial past and the dismantling of persisting neo-colonial, violent structures, enabling us to move beyond a monological view of the world. It is imperative that we consider Europe as a unified entity. Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge the violent colonial history of Europe, which continues to exert a profound influence on the continent. At the EU borders, people are deported to detention camps and perish in the Mediterranean Sea. In agricultural industries, migrants are exploited, imperial ways of life have become established through mass consumption, and nature is destroyed through extractivism. It is imperative that this be never forgotten and that it be continually remembered. In recalling the words of Fanon, we are reminded of the following:

"This Europe that has never ceased to speak of humanity and to proclaim that it was concerned only for humanity. We know today with what suffering humanity has paid for each of the victories of the European spirit." Such irritation provides Europe with an opportunity to engage in constructive dialogue with the very groups that constitute its population, yet are frequently overlooked or marginalised.

It is only through this ongoing dialogue, which has the potential to evoke a certain degree of irritation within Europe itself, that a sustainable transformation of Europe into a plural, diverse, and equal society can be achieved. Art, in all its manifestations, not only provokes irritation but also gives rise to new situations that can be interpreted as an expression of Europe's development.

The critical function of art serves as an indispensable guarantor of plurality in Europe. However, it is important to exercise caution. Right-wing populists appropriate the language of art and culture for their own ends. Such discourse may, and frequently does, function as an exclusionary and patronising tool. While right-wing populist forces in particular pursue a destructive critique of Europe that leads to nationalism and racism, progressive art offers a counter-narrative that opposes this right-wing populist project. Artistic expression should serve to challenge and provoke, whilst simultaneously seeking to constructively advance a progressive agenda that does not foster division but rather strives to unite. It dismantles oppressive structures and is not reactionary in nature. The aesthetic principles of art have consistently emerged through a process of dialogue between disparate cultural practices. This implies that actors from a multitude of global locations will contribute to Europe's capacity to develop, resolve and liberate itself as a project of modernity. The objective is to achieve liberation from violence, nationalism, right-wing extremism, exploitation and oppression. Liberation through the respect of all individuals based on their inherent dignity. This also implies that the European project should cease to differentiate between individuals on the basis of arbitrary criteria and instead recognise each person as a human being.

We must join forces to fight for a future Europe that is open to the world. We cannot think Europe from within ourselves; we can only think Europe through the eyes of all people. It is imperative that we collaborate to advocate for a future Europe that is receptive to global influences. It is imperative that we do not limit our perspective to that of a single individual or group; rather, we must consider the multifaceted nature of Europe through the lens of its diverse humanity. It is therefore imperative that creative artists and individuals from all age groups provide new impetus to political decision-makers in order to shape a Europe that is humane in its outlook.

In conclusion, I would like to pose two questions and make one suggestion: What does Europe want to be? Who do we want to be? These are not merely theoretical inquiries; our decisions, perspectives, and actions will invariably provide responses to these questions. It is imperative that Europe is viewed not merely as a political, bureaucratic, security, or cultural project, but rather to understand Europe as a project of humanity. This entails fostering opportunities for participation and emancipation.